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ABSTRACT

The ability of counselors to use empowerment strategies depends on such interacting areas as level of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills; respect for the worldview of Latino clients; ability to view people from a strength rather than a deficit perspective; and willingness to suspend judgment and premature interpretation about the clients' presenting issues. The same qualities must also be present when counselors use advocacy strategies. Successful advocacy, like successful counseling, requires rapport, unconditional positive regard, and equity, all of which are characteristic of the Latino cultural values and perspectives discussed in this paper. Three case studies of Latino individuals referred for counseling are presented and then analyzed and discussed from a Latino/Latina perspective. (Contains 8 references.) (MKA)

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Chapter Five

Empowerment Strategies from Latino/ Latina Perspectives

Patricia Arredondo and Luis Vázquez

> "When I'm out with workers, they teach me every single day. It's an amazing thing. Obviously I don't know everything, I just know a little bit. But still the workers teach me every single day as I teach them. The second thing I know from experience is that whenever a critical situation hits us, the best source of power, the best source of hope is straight from the people." (1974, p. 521)

The words of Cesar Chavez are indicative of the humble and respectful attitude many Latinos are taught as children. Look to others, don't be arrogant, and value the relationship are admonitions communicated by parents and grandparents throughout one's youth and sometimes even as one is an adult. *Personalismo* is the concept and value that underlies interpersonal behavior. Though not easy to translate literally, it is about valuing and appreciating the person, an attitude that is taught and reinforced so that it becomes internalized over time.

There are two or three other terms we want to mention that are embedded in Latino culture. These are *orgullo*/pride, *respeto*, and *dignidad*, signifying the qualitative nature of interpersonal relationships. The prevailing worldview also reflects collectivism, interdependence, and high regard for authority and position. Thus, when it comes to empowerment strategies from Latino/Latina perspectives, counselors need to have an awareness and knowledge about cultural values that influence communication patterns, interpersonal relationships, and the individual's sense of self-determination. In addition, counselors must also be knowledgeable about how these values interact with different dimensions of identity including gender, class, sexual orientation, religious or

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spiritual beliefs, generational differences, and ethnic group differences (Arredondo, et al., 1996).

Latinos is a plural, encompassing gender-based term. In certain discussions, Latino/s may be used to refer only to men. Latinas is only used in reference to women. Hispanic is the term used by the United States government, though it is often rejected by Latinos/as.

Who are Latinos?

One answer is that we are the fastest growing cultural group in the United States with the youngest population of youth 18 years of age and under. We are a highly heterogeneous and very complex population. While we can be characterized collectively as originating from Spanish-speaking countries, predominantly of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban heritage, there is an increasing presence of Latinos from Central and South America and the Caribbean Islands. Latinos prefer to self-identify by their ethnic membership, be it Colombian, Spanish, or Guatemalan.

In addition to the cultural and ethnic differences, Latinos' "racial" mixture may also have a major impact on life opportunities and stressors that they experience in the United States. We represent Caucasian, Mongoloid, Negroid, or a combination of these racial groupings (Casas & Vasquez, 1996). The inherent phenotypic characteristics of these various combinations can and often do have a great impact on the life opportunities of the Latino population (Vázquez, L.A., García-Vázquez. E., Bauman, S.A., & Sierra, A.S., 1997). Other factors to consider are socio-economic status, educational attainment, acculturation level, actual and perceived power, and self-entitlement . Chacón, Cohen, Camarena, Gonzalez, & Strover (1985) found that even though many of these differences exist between and within the Latino groups, there are also gender differences based on cultural socialization practices and religious beliefs. Latina women have a higher unemployment rate and lower educational level than their Latino men counterparts. For counselors, it is also important to understand the concepts of *machismo* and *marianismo* and how these cultural frameworks influence gender-based behavior.

Cultural competence means considering contextual and situational life stressors generally experienced by Latino populations. Counselors must be prepared to assess out-group status, social isolation, marginal social status, and status inconsistencies in the context of the presenting issues for

counseling. The assessment of these areas for Latino clients sets the stage for appropriate process and desired goals for treatment.

Empowerment from Latino/a Perspectives

Broadly speaking, clinicians have varying perspectives on empowerment. McWhirter (1991, p.222) described it as a "conceptual framework that can be applied across a variety of counseling interventions." In a discussion about promoting the empowerment of women through counseling, the following description was offered:

Empowerment embodies knowledge, clarity and flexibility of thinking, self-confidence, and positive self-esteem in many forms and expressions. It is within the individual and generates a sense of personal power and self-authorization. Empowerment involves on-going learning processes that facilitate change, growth and functional relationships (Arredondo, 1991).

The concept of empowerment when applied to working with individual Latinos would of necessity have to be flexible. The myriad of variables and contextual factors discussed above describe the need for complexity of thinking and planning. However, there are cultural values that need to be referenced in relation to empowerment. They are respeto, personaliso, dignidad, and collectivism. To facilitate an individual's empowerment with cultural competency, these values must always be considered. Inherent in these values are counseling behaviors that demonstrate mutuality, collaboration, and interdependency.

When considering empowerment strategies, counselors can also use the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis, 1992 and Arredondo, et al., 1996). They provide essential guidelines that will likely lead to more successful cross-cultural encounters. Consider the following examples and the possible approaches for empowering Latino/Latina clients.

Case Examples

Elena came to the United States mainland from Puerto Rico to study art. She earned a BA in the midst of her parent's divorce, and found a job immediately upon graduation. When Elena came to counseling, she expressed concerns about job satisfaction, a boyfriend who was more like a brother, and the well-being of her younger brothers in Puerto Rico. Despite her highly rational demeanor, she seemed overwhelmed and lonely at the same time.

She talked about feeling isolated and wanted medication to help her feel less anxious.

Edwin was referred for counseling by the Department of Rehabilitation because of indications of depression. A 35-year-old father of two, he became disabled through a work accident. He walked, seemingly with considerable pain, and had to sit upright in a straight-back chair. His wife of 10 years worked 60 hours a week at two jobs to ensure the basic family necessities. Edwin held on to the hope that he would someday be able to return to full-time employment. In the meantime, he experienced mixed feelings: self-loathing because he could not work, and resentment toward his wife who seemed to enjoy her second job working as a cleaning person at a television studio. Edwin demonstrated initiative and care for his children by connecting with a local Catholic priest and enrolling his children in the neighborhood school. Still, he lamented the limitations of his condition and what it meant for the future.

Francisca was a 50 year old immigrant woman from Guatemala employed by a major hospital in the food service department. Because she had healthcare insurance, she was referred to a Latina clinician in private practice. Her manager indicated that Francisca complained about leg pains and tiredness. A physical exam yielded nothing unusual about her health. She lived alone, sent most of her earnings home to a son who was in dentistry school, and socialized infrequently. At her first visit, Francisca wanted to engage in *plática* or small talk, inquiring about the therapist's ethnic background and parents.

Analysis and Discussion from Latino/a Perspectives

In the first example, there are several issues to consider before partnering with Elena to develop empowerment strategies. Elena left a cultural society in Puerto Rico where she was part of the majority population and entered a cultural society in mainland United States possibly identified with a minority status. As a Latina with a Bachelor's degree, it sets her apart from the majority of the Latina population in the United States. Her ability to live away from her parents to receive an education is an indication of her level of independence and a sign that the relationship with her parents is less traditional. For many Latinas in traditional households, the parents do not allow such distance from the nuclear and extended family. Elena was also able to be successful even though her parents were getting a divorce. This indicates stamina

and self-sufficiency although, from a more culturally traditional perspective, moving home at this time might have been more appropriate. It is possible that her earning power on the mainland gave her an opportunity to contribute financially to her family's household depending on the circumstances of the divorce. However, her possible job dissatisfaction and a surrogate brother as a boyfriend indicatethe complexity of the decisions made to attempt to stabilize her own livelihood in a time of chaos.

Elena's concern for her younger siblings showed a shared responsibility for caring established in the family of origin. This could possibly indicate the value of family (collectivism) before individuality. We are not sure in this situation if her boyfriend is of the same ethnicity, bilingual, or sensitive to Elena's concerns. Her feelings of isolation may be indicative of a grieving process due to her parents' divorce. They might also be attributable to a lack of support in her current environment, a sense of responsibility for her siblings' wellbeing, or feelings of helplessness in her ability to take care of things. Not being able to use he language of emotion, which could be Spanish, might also be an important factor, especially when coupled with her acculturation process in a new environment of work, relationships, and culture.

Other issues to consider may include her phenotypic characteristics in relation to her environment of employment, socio-economic status, lack of perceived power, gender and Latina competition issues related to her educational status as compared to other Latinos, out-group status, young age, and possible lack of support systems. There are also indicators of wanting a quick solution through medication to relieve her symptoms. Examining the various options according to the information presented, the counselor may begin to engage with Elena in identifying various empowerment strategies. Empowerment strategies should not be considered until the counselor has explored her/his own cultural, racial, gender, and language biases that may exist in relation to the client.

In Elena's situation, the exploration of her current needs and her relationship with her boyfriend may lead to uncovering issues concerning her family of origin. If Spanish is her language of emotion, and even if the counselor is not Spanish-speaking, encouraging her to speak in Spanish would enable Elena to express herself from a position of comfort and security. This is similar to the empty chair technique. Understanding her role in her family of origin and dedication to her younger siblings' welfare could lead to the possibilities of them visiting her, opening up communication

by her visiting her family, or establishing a support network with extended family members. Validating her ability to be successful in decision-making skills may create the possibility of encouraging Elena to use these same skills in understanding some of her struggles in the work environment and her relationship with her boyfriend. Due to her ability to be self-sufficient, Elena may want to return to Puerto Rico and seek employment to be near to and part of her family of origin. In addition, it is possible that the boyfriend is both a support and a hindrance. However, a counselor would not encourage a client to eliminate their coping responses without replacing them with healthy ones. Overall, Elena has many skills. She is educated, self-sufficient, intelligent, motivated, and creative. The combination of these factors allows for a variety of empowerment strategies.

Edwin presents a different situation because of his acquired disability. "When an individual suffers some disability or impairment, whether mental or physical, he or she is labeled as such. Unfortunately, such labels often imply dependence and limited worth" (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels & D'Andrea, 1998, p. 173).

Dealing with a disability often creates feelings of grief, frustration, guilt, and anger. The combination of these feelings may result in an internalization of learned helplessness resulting in depression. The acquired disability has forced Edwin, willingly or unwillingly, to redefine his male role and identity in relation to his family and to make adaptations in his cultural perceptions related to machismo and work identity. His relationship with his wife also has been redefined. All of these issues directly relate to his perceived gender role within the nuclear family, as well as to his social isolation, marginal social status, and actual and perceived power related to age and male privilege.

Edwin's reactions to his current situation may indicate that he was a proud provider for the family, ensuring economic support for the family's wellbeing. Many of these roles are traditional male roles defined through Edwin's culture. Superimposing a disability onto Edwin's view of his family roles threatens his identity as a male, husband, and father. What is apparent about Edwin is that he shows caring and a strong sense of responsibility toward his children's welfare. He demonstrated this by making arrangements with a local priest for schooling that benefited his children. Edwin also has a strong work ethic. This is apparent by his desire to return to work. He also believes that he should be a strong and independent husband, as indicated through his withstanding of considerable pain from the work injury without complaining.

Finally, Edwin is able, with *dignidad* and still maintaining *orgullo* (pride), to communicate with others to get some of his family's needs met, as shown with his interaction with the local priest and his willingness to participate in counseling.

Empowerment strategies would of necessity have to consider the situation holistically. The disability is forcing Edwin to reconsider his values and beliefs of himself as a man, husband, and father. His definition of a man has to be reframed and become flexible in order to cognitively assimilate a more androgynous existence in his relationship with others. The acceptance of this definition would provide greater interdependency and power-sharing in the relationship with his wife. In turn, it would lower his threatening view of her success and happiness with her contribution to the family's welfare. The acceptance of the interdependency would help Edwin redefine the importance of his role as a major caretaker for his children. These experiences could strengthen his relationships with his children and expand his sensitivity to child care. While these issues of interdependency are being addressed Edwin could also pursue the possibility of being retrained or reeducated in another field of work that could meet some of his occupational needs. Edwin could also learn about the grieving process related to experiencing a sudden disability. How does a counselor empower Edwin to accomplish these goals?

Apparently, Edwin felt comfortable in consulting with the local priest in addressing some of his family's needs. The counselor may have to serve as a cultural broker in establishing credibility, support, and understanding of Edwin's needs. Edwin has many strengths that were discussed. Capitalizing on his perceptions of strength and engaging an acceptable cultural healer (priest) as part of his treatment could provide the empowerment needed for Edwin to be successful in meeting his and his family's needs.

Francisca's strengths are immediately observable: she is employed, has healthcare insurance, can admit to physical maladies and is willing to seek help. All of these behaviors indicate resourcefulness and personal empowerment. This is not a helpless or passive woman, often the stereotype about Latinas. Furthermore, her purpose for working is tied directly to her son's benefit. Presumably, Francisca took some risks in coming to the United States alone. Again, more characteristically, men are the more typical single immigrants.

A culturally competent counselor would recognize Francisca's need to connect through small talk or *plática*. This is indicative of personalismo and mutuality. The culturally uninformed counselor

would likely label this as inappropriate and intrusive behavior, electing not to self-disclose her/his ethnicity and interpret her questions as forms of resistance. To do so would ensure the likelihood that Francisca would not return to counseling. How could she respect someone who is not willing to share about family?

To work from Latino/a perspectives of empowerment, the counselor would have to be willing to engage in reciprocal *plática* and see this form of dialogue as a possible therapeutic process for the client. Additionally, the counselor needs to acknowledge Francisca's strengths and coping mechanisms. Once this stage is set, the counselor can inquire further about the physical symptoms of pains and tiredness. It is important not to jump to conclusions and interpretations about what may appear to be psychosomatic manifestations. Empowerment strategies are about first meeting clients at their base of strength.

Empowerment and Advocacy

Without a doubt, advocacy and empowerment are both very positive terms in the counseling world, but the application of these concepts must occur based on cultural competency. In many ways, advocacy and empowerment are both culturally relative and culturally universal concepts and practices. The counselor must continually make determinations about whether to employ strategies that are culturally relative to the Latino client's situation and environment or whether to apply a practice that one has used successfully with non-Latino clients. How can one predict what will be the most appropriate intervention or technique to use in a particular situation?

The Multicultural Counseling Competencies describe the domain of "culturally appropriate intervention strategies." Inherent in these competencies is the capacity to be culturally aware, knowledgeable and skilled when well-meaning advocacy is intended, particularly in institutional settings. For example, in California and in other states, there have been movements against bilingual education. In a school setting, a counselor may advocate for the immigrant parents who want to see their children in a bilingual education classroom temporarily but who feel pressure from the administration to move the child into an ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom. Culturally appropriate intervention strategies must take into consideration the individual, institutional, and sociopolitical pressure aimed toward the status quo. I may want to strongly encourage ESL because I believe learning English

quickly will reduce the child's discriminatory experiences and because the administration will approve of this action, but this action might send a message of cultural insensitivity, not empowerment, to the parents.

One final thought: Sometimes there is a fine line between advocacy and patronizing behavior. Latinos are highly oriented to respect for authority but also have a strong sense of self-determination. In U.S. society, we always have to anticipate the behavior of representatives of the mainstream. With counseling, this anticipation and guardedness also occurs. Observe your own thought process the next time you are in an advocacy situation with Latinos—what is patronizing behavior versus genuine helping?

Conclusion

The operationalized multicultural counseling competencies (1996) specify content areas of awareness, knowledge, and skills that can lead to culturally competent empowerment. The consideration of the Latino cultural values and other variables allows the counselor to begin to develop a framework of counseling based on individual differences and cultural background. Such a framework would consist of the counselor's self-awareness of his or her own personal issues related to worldview, identity, and acculturation. Awareness of worldview would require counselors to examine their assumptions and values about a person's existence in society, within a family, and individually. Identity consists of how counselors have developed their roles as helping professionals and as individuals in interpersonal relationships. This concept also includes the assumptions of the theoretical orientation from which the counselor has chosen to work with the client. The concept of acculturation addresses the degree to which the counselor's assumptions of "normal" behaviors allow for enough flexibility to accept diverse forms of behaviors that the client may present.

The ability of counselors to use empowerment strategies depends on such interacting areas as level of self-awareness, knowledge, and skills; respect for the worldview of Latino clients; ability to view people from a strength rather than a deficit perspective; and willingness to suspend judgment and premature interpretation about the clients' presenting issues. The same qualities must also be present when we use advocacy strategies. Successful advocacy, like successful counseling, requires rapport, unconditional positive regard, and equity, all of which are

characteristic of the Latino cultural values and perspectives discussed in this paper. Everyone should learn more about these and other culture-specific frameworks, and put the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992 and Arredondo, Et al., 1996) on the top of one's reading list.

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